

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

"Embassador Merican," First Meeting with the Tai-kun A Dispatch from Townsend Harris, Japan, 1859

I STARTED for my audience about ten o'clock with the same escort as on my visit to the Minister, but my guards all wore kami-shimos and breeches which only covered half the thigh, leaving all the rest of the leg bare. My dress was a coat embroidered with gold after the pattern furnished by the State Department, blue pantaloons with a broad gold band running down each leg, cocked hat with gold tassels, and a pearl-handled dress-sword.

Mr. Heusken's dress was the undress navy uniform, regulation sword and cocked hat. We crossed the moat by a bridge that was about half a mile from my house. On arriving at the second moat, all were required to leave their norimonos except the Prince of Shinano and myself. When we arrived within about three hundred yards of the last bridge Shinano also left his norimono; and our horses, his spears, etc., etc., with the ordinary attendants, all remained. I was carried up to the bridge itself; and, as they say, farther than a Japanese was ever carried before, and here I dismounted, giving the President's letter, which I had brought in my norimono, to Mr. Heusken to carry. We crossed this bridge, and at some one hundred and fifty or two hundred yards from the gate I entered the audience hall. Before entering here, however, I put on the new shoes I had worn on my visit to the Minister, and the Japanese did not even ask me to go in my stocking-feet.

As I entered the vestibule I was met by two officers of the household. We stopped, faced each other, and then bowed; they then led me along a hall to a room where, on entering, I found the two chairs and a comfortable brazier. I should here note that tobacco is not served among the refreshments of the palace. I again drank the "tea gruel."

The breeches are the great feature of the dress; they are made of yellow silk, and the legs are some six to seven feet long! Consequently, when the wearer walks, they stream out behind him, and give him the appearance of walking on his knees, an illusion which is helped out by the short stature of the Japanese and the great width, over the shoulders, of their kami-shimos.

The cap is also a great curiosity, and defies description; it is made of a black varnished material, and looks like a Scotch

Kilmarnock cap, which has been opened only some three inches wide, and is fantastically perched on the very apex of the head; the front comes just to the top edge of the forehead, but the back projects some distance behind the head. This extraordinary affair is kept in place by a light-colored silk cord which, passing over the top of the "Coronet," passes down over the temples and is tied under the chin. A lashing runs horizontally across the forehead, and being attached to the perpendicular cord, passes behind the head, where it is tied.

My friend Shinano was very anxious to have me enter the audience chamber and rehearse my part. This I declined as gently as I could, telling him that the general customs of all courts were so similar that I had no fear of making any mistakes, particularly as he had kindly explained their part of the ceremony, while my part was to be done after our Western fashion. I really believe he was anxious that I should perform my part in such a manner as to make a favorable impression on those who would see me for the first time. I discovered also that I had purposely been brought to the palace a good hour before the time, so that he might get through his rehearsal before the time for my actual audience. Finding I declined the rehearsal, I was again taken to the room that I first entered, which was comfortably warm and had chairs to sit on. Tea was again served to me.

At last I was informed that the time had arrived for my audience, and I passed down by the poor daimios, who were still seated like so many statues in the same place; but when I had got as far as their front rank, I passed in front of their line and halted on their right flank, toward which I faced. Shinano here threw himself on his hands and knees. I stood behind him, and Mr. Heusken was just behind me.

The audience chamber faced in the same manner as the room in which the great audience was seated, but separated from it by the usual sliding doors; so that although they could see me pass and hear all that was said at the audience, they could not see into

the chamber. At length, on a signal being made, the Prince of Shinano began to crawl along on his hands and knees, and when I half turned to the right and entered the audience chamber, a chamberlain called out in a loud voice "Embassador Merican!" I halted about six feet from the door and bowed, then proceeded nearly to the middle of the room, where I again halted and bowed. Again proceeding, I stopped about ten feet from the end of the room, exactly opposite to the Prince of Bitchiu on my right hand, where he and the other five members of the Great Council were prostrate on their faces. On my left hand were three brothers of the Tai-kun prostrated in the same manner, and all of them being "end-on" towards me. After a pause of a few seconds I addressed the Tai-kun as follows: "May it please your Majesty: In presenting my letters of credence from the President of the United States, I am directed to express to your Majesty the sincere wishes of the President for your health and happiness and for the prosperity of your dominions. I consider it a great honor that I have been selected to fill the high and important place of Plenipotentiary of the United States at the court of your Majesty, and as my earnest wishes are to unite the two countries more closely in the ties of enduring friendship, my constant exertions shall be directed to the attainment of that happy end."

Here I stopped and bowed.

After a short silence the Tai-kun began to jerk his head backward over his left shoulder, at the same time stamping with his right foot. This was repeated three or four times. After this, he spoke audibly and in a pleasant and firm voice what was interpreted

as follows: "Pleased with the letter sent with the Ambassador from a far-distant country, and likewise pleased with his discourse. Intercourse shall be continued forever." Mr. Heusken, who had been standing at the door of the audience chamber, now advanced with the President's letter, bowing three times. As he approached, the Minister for Foreign Affairs rose to his feet and stood by me. I removed the silk cover over the box, opened it, and also raised the cover of the letter so that the Minister could see the writing. I then closed the box, replaced the silk covering (made of red and white stripes, six and seven), and handed the same to the Minister, who received it with both hands, and placed it on a handsome lacquered stand which was placed a little above him. He then lay down again, and I turned towards the Tai-kun, who gave me to understand my audience was at an end by making me a courteous bow. I bowed, retreated backward, halted, bowed again and for the last time.

So ended my audience, when I was reconducted to my original room, and served with more tea gruel. A good deal of negotiation had been used by the Japanese to get me to eat a dinner at the palace, alone, or with Mr. Heusken only. This I declined doing. I offered to partake of it, provided one of the royal family or the Prime Minister would eat with me. I was told that their customs forbade either from doing so. I replied that the customs of my country forbade any one to eat in a house where the host, or his representative, did not sit down to table with him. At last the matter was arranged by ordering the dinner to be sent to my lodgings. ■

Source

Eva March Tappan, ed., *The World's Story: A History of the World in Story, Song and Art*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), Vol. I: *China, Japan, and the Islands of the Pacific*, pp. 438-442, as digitized for the Modern History Sourcebook.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/harris-japan1.html>